Cities of the Global South Reader

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

"Kinshasa and Its (Im)material Infrastructure"

Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City (2005)

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SIMULACRA OF INFRASTRUCTURE

In ongoing discussions concerning the nature of the African city architects, urban planners, sociologists, anthropologists, demographers and others devote a lot of attention to the built form, and more generally, to the city's material infrastructure. Architecture has become a central issue in western discourses and reflections on how to plan, engineer, sanitize and transform the urban site and its public spaces. Mirroring that discourse, architecture has also started to occupy an increasingly important place in attempts to come to terms with the specificities of the African urbanscape and to imagine new urban paradigms for the African city of the future. Indeed, one can hardly underestimate the importance of the built form and of the material, physical infrastructure if one wants to understand the ways the urban space unfolds and designs itself. For example, studying the process of the "bunkerization" of the city, as it is called by its inhabitants, that is the fact that one of Kinshasa's crucial spaces, the compound, has evolved from an open space lined by flowers and shrubs in the 1940s and 1950s to today's closed *parcelles*, surrounded by high walls that make the inside invisible to the street, would certainly contribute to a better understanding of the city's history of unraveling social relationships, its altered sense of security and its changing attitude towards the qualities of public and private.

However, as Kinshasa's ports reveal, the city's infrastructure is of a very specific kind. Its functioning is punctuated by constant breakdown. The qualities of failing often give the urban infrastructure the character of a simulacrum. For example, the television set, a status symbol, occupies a central place in the living room, but often it just sits there without functioning at all because there is nothing to plug it into, or because it broke down a long time ago, or because there is no electricity. Often, while in Kinshasa, I am reminded of Mary Douglas' "*The Hotel Kwilu: A Model of Models.*" In this text she describes how she visits the Hotel Kwilu, located in the town of Kikwit overlooking the Kwilu river:

> The Hotel Kwilu looks like a modest version of the Sheraton or the Marriott or any of a number of well-standardized airport hotels: modest by comparison, but grandiose in its setting. As I remember, it is a handsome building made of solid stone, with broad steps up to the front entry, a reception desk on the right, a big glass-roofed atrium in front, potted palm trees around, a bar to the left, and a restaurant beyond that, all calm, cool, and inviting. Before looking in I asked to see the bedroom. It was still in the accepted Sheraton style: clean, big, huge mirror, air-conditioning, twin beds, twin pictures on the wall, the telephone, the reading lamp, well carpeted, the bathroom en suite. Inside the bathroom, again, perfectly in style, the bath, the gleaming fittings on the hand basin, shower, hairwashing spray, the lavatory. Everything was there, not forgetting the bottle of drinking water. The only thing I thought was odd was that the bath was full of cold water. I wondered if the last guest had not left them time to clean it, but no, I was told this was to economize water. The candle and

matches by the bed I took for an extra courtesy in case of emergency.

[...]

The receptionist asked me to pay in advance so that they could procure the diesel fuel needed for refrigeration and electricity. He also said that the electric lighting went out at 8 o'clock, to save diesel. [...] However, when I got upstairs I found, with the help of the candle, that the taps did not run, the lavatory did not flush, and neither the phone nor the air-conditioning was connected. But I rejoiced in the huge bath full of water, and a dipper for carrying water to the hand-basin and the lavatory. (Douglas 1989)

If Douglas had arrived at her hotel some hours before, she would have witnessed two women, with large plastic buckets on their heads, walking back and forth from a nearby public water tap all the way up to her room to fill the bathtub.

As with the Hotel Kwilu, Kinshasa is full of such disconnected figments, reminders, and echoes of a modernity that exists as form but no longer has the content that originally went with it. The fragments themselves are embedded in other rhythms and temporalities, in totally different layers of infrastructure and social networks. Failing infrastructure and an economy of scarcity therefore constantly delineate the limits of the possible, although they also generate often surprising possibilities, through a specific aesthetics of repair, by means of which breakdown is bypassed or overcome.

THE UNFINISHED CITY

Along the bypass, the main road which coils around Kinshasa's southern and western parts, a dusty sand road leads to the commune of Mont Ngafula. This neighborhood emerged in the 1970s as a semi-residential area for executives, functionaries and upcoming politicians. Many compounds in this neighborhood are spacious, with lots of trees and green. But many houses were never finished. With the generalized breakdown that characterized the end of Mobutu's reign [Ed. note: Mobutu was leader of the DRC, then called Zaire from 1965–97], the emerging middle class that bought building plots in this neighborhood was gradually cut off from its income. The (often spectacular) houses they had dreamt of building for themselves were left in various stages of unfinished abandon, impressing upon one the image of the city as a never ending, perpetual building site, a characteristic Kinshasa shares with many other African towns. Today, people live in the skeletons of their frozen dreams of progress and grandeur, in constructions of concrete and cement without doors, windows, roofs. Only the ground plan betrays the original aspirations.

Other less fortunate inhabitants of this neighborhood witnessed how their houses disappeared overnight. During the rainy season, erosion is a constant threat in many parts of the city. Overnight, the erosion, which often finds its origin in deficient drainage, cuts through the sandy soil of Kinshasa's hills, leaving behind spectacular abysses in which houses, roads and other infrastructure disappear. Here Kinshasa becomes a cannibalistic city, literally devouring its own urban tissue. Today in Kinshasa, erosion threatens whole neighborhoods in at least 400 different spots.

Together with the dust roads, the generally spacious and green compounds, though usually surrounded by high walls, give the commune of Mont Ngafula a rather rural character. As in most neighborhoods of Kinshasa, water and electricity reach this part of the city only sparingly. Water, for example, usually comes between 2 and 4 am, whereas electricity is made available according to a system of what Kinois refer to as *delestage*: in different sectors of the network, SNEL or REGIDESO, the national electricity and water companies, switch electricity and water off at certain times in order to feed other sectors. It is totally unclear which criteria determine the distribution over the various communes and neighborhoods. Some receive water and electricity during certain hours of the day (but unfortunately these hours often vary from one day to the next). Other parts of the city are supplied for weeks and then cut off for weeks. Some areas are not served for months while many neighborhoods are not even connected. Each of these cases sets in motion a carrousel of people. Girls and boys are sent out with buckets, tiles and cans to fetch water in nearby or more distant neighborhoods, fathers visit their friends to charge the batteries of their cell phones, and whole neighborhoods move elsewhere to watch soccer games in those compounds where there is a television set that works. When technologies remain silent or break down, and thereby give form to yet another level of invisibility that shapes the city,

these lacks and absences generate new spheres of social interaction and different coping strategies and regimes of knowledge and power.

POSSIBILITIES OF INFRASTRUCTURE

Infrastructural fragments thus also enable the creation of new social spaces. A couple of years ago, on the corner between the main Bypass road and the entrance to the commune of Mont Ngafula, someone started building a FINA gas station. It took several years to complete, but the gas station finally opened in 2002. A couple of months later the owner placed a huge lamppost on the premise. Since the gas station used its own generator and therefore did not depend on the city for its electricity supply, the lamp kept burning. In no time at all, the lamppost gave birth to a large numbers of bars, a cyber cafe and a telephone shop around the station, while buses and taxis began to use this place as the terminus of their trajectory, thereby bringing even more people to the bars. Business at the near by Fwakin Hotel started picking up again after many years. With fascination I observed how one lamppost transformed what was a quiet corner with little movement after nightfall into an important meeting point bustling with life until midnight. The process of random occupation of space also reveals the organic approach Kinois [Ed. note: residents of Kinshasa] have to the production of the city. Space, in a way, belongs to whomever uses it, despite the halfhearted attempts of the city authorities to control the slow but unstoppable occupation and the progressive denser use of that space.

Simple material infrastructures and technologies, as well as their dysfunctioning and breakdown, thus create, define, and transform new sites of transportation, new configurations of entangled spatialities, new public spaces of work and relaxation, new itineraries and clusters of relations, new social interactions.

The *phonie* [Ed. note: a form of cyber café] is a good example of how material infrastructure and technology create new forms of sociality and new topographies of propinquity, how they can bring people into physical proximity with each other, how they generate new (trans)urban public spheres, or enable, maintain and carry forward existing social landscapes, networks and affiliations under changed circumstances. *Phonies* connect Kinshasa to the rural hinterland. Every *phonie* transmits messages to specific towns. As a result, people from the same ethnic or regional background meet at these *phonies*, where they often spend several days before getting in touch with the person they want to talk to at the other end. The *phonie*, therefore, provides a place, a social island within the city to maintain, strengthen and reactivate different, often pre-urban, ties of locality and belonging.

However, such islands of communication, association, collaboration and proximity, with their possibilities of reimagining a different ethics for the current urban life, remain very dependent on the materiality of their infrastructure and are therefore very vulnerable. In the case of the *phonie* or the cyber cafe there is the constant dependence on hardware that is costly, electricity that is interrupted all the time, radio transmitters that risk being damaged because of unstable voltage, solar panels that are hard to get by and easily break down, batteries of poor quality that have to be constantly recharged, computer viruses that infect all the city's PCs and are as difficult to get rid of as the viruses that attack the people of this city in real life. Beyond that, the existence of the *phonie*, for example, is strongly dependent on the absence of other, newer technologies. These may be more sophisticated and efficient but also more demanding, necessitating a larger investment or a higher degree of technical knowhow, which inevitably turns its users into mere consumers rather than producers or controllers of that technology. For example, as I write, the introduction of sophisticated cell phone technology by international communication multinationals in Congo is already turning the *phonie* meeting points and the social geographies they engender into archeological sites. In 2003, seven different telecommunication networks, each with its own international (American, South African, French, Belgian, Chinese) affiliations, were competing with each other to control the potentially vast Congolese telecommunications market (VODACOM, CELTEL, TELCEL, OASIS, AFRITEL, CCT [*Congo-ChineTeliphone*], COMCEL). In 2003, also, large parts of the interior were opened up through the implementation of cell phone technology in which these international companies invested a lot of money. For the first time ever, people in remote villages can call Kinshasa, Brussels, Paris or New York and reach beyond their own horizon within seconds. Wonderful as this is in itself, it also means that established forms of cooperation, communication and collective responsibility, with their specific social capital

and the particular levels of trust they summon, will become obsolete and disappear in the very near future (no doubt to be replaced by something else).

INVISIBLE ARCHITECTURE

In spite of the fact that an analysis of the different physical sites through which the city exists and invents itself helps us to better understand the specific ways in which the materiality of the infrastructure generates particular sets of relations in the city, I would submit that in the end, in a city like Kinshasa, it is not, or not primarily, the material infrastructure or the built form that makes the city a city. The city, in a way, exists beyond its architecture. In Kinshasa, the built form is not, or is no longer, the product of a careful planning or engineering of the urban space. It is, rather, produced randomly in human sites as living space. Constantly banalized and reduced to its most basic function, that of a shelter, the built form is generated by this much more real, living city which exists as a heterogeneous conglomeration of truncated urban forms, fragments and reminders of material and mental urban "elsewheres" (a lamppost, a radio antenna, a television screen, dreams of life in the diaspora). These are embedded into autochthonous dynamics and into an urban life that is itself produced through the entanglement of a wide variety of rhizomatic trajectories, relations and mirroring realities. They enjoin, merge, include, fracture, fragment and reorder the urban space through the practices and discourses of its inhabitants. Within these local dynamics, within these syncretic multiplicities, the cultural status of the built form seems to be of lesser importance, or rather, the material infrastructure that counts in the making of the city is of a very specific nature.

First of all, the infrastructure and architecture that function best in Kinshasa are almost totally invisible on a material level. Under the trees along most of the city's main roads and boulevards one finds all kinds of places: garages, carpenter's workshops, showrooms for sofas, beds and other furniture, barber shops, cement factories, public scribes, florists, churches and a whole pleiad of other commercial sites offering a variety of services. Yet, none of these take place in built structures. What one needs in order to operate a garage is not a building named "garage," but rather the idea of a garage. The only material element needed to turn an open space into a garage is a used automobile tire on which the garage owner has written the word quado (supposedly after the name of a well-known Belgian garage owner in the colonial period). One cord between two trees suffices to hang up the newspapers of the day, thereby creating a meeting place for the *parlementaires debout*, the people who gather under the trees to comment on the newspapers' content and erect their agora, their parliament, by means of a rhetorical architecture, the built form of the spoken word. These vibrant urban spaces teeming with all kinds of activities generate an infrastructure of paucity, defined by its material absence as much as by its presence. The built form that makes this possible is not made of cement and bricks but consists of the body of the tree under which people gather and meet, and the space between the trees that line the city's main roads. Shortcutting any dependence on unstable infrastructure and technologies, this is the level of infrastructural accommodation, the only level of accumulation also, that really seems to work.

REFERENCE

Douglas, M. (1989) "Distinguished lecture: The Hotel Kwilu—A model of models," *American Anthropologist*, 91(4): 855–865.